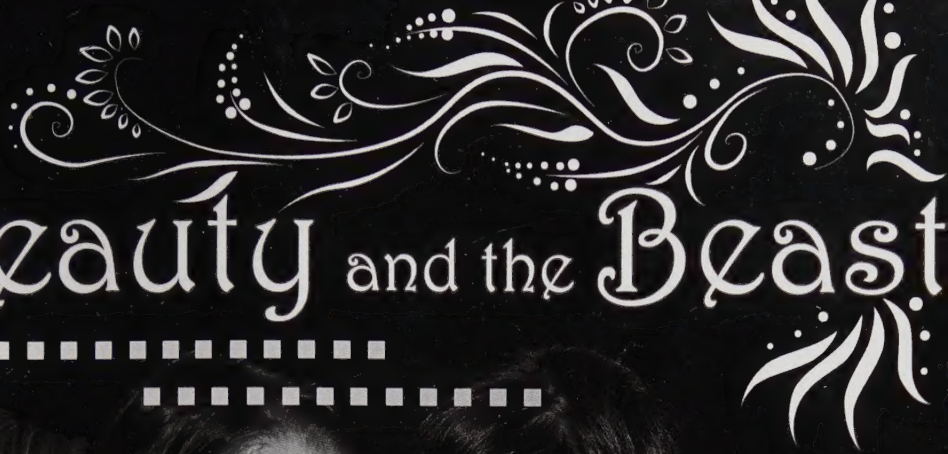




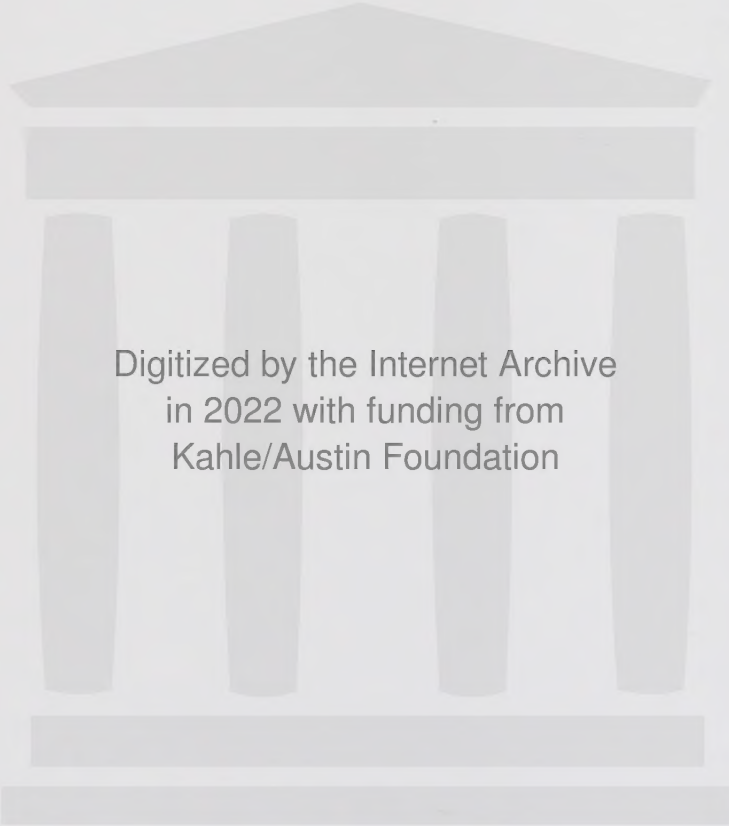
Beauty and the Beast



MEGAN RYLAND

ENDING THE LOVE/HATE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN GIRLS AND THEIR BODIES





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Beauty and the Beast:

Ending the Love/Hate Relationship Between Girls and
their Bodies

By

Megan Ryland

Tiberious Publishing
Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Beauty and the Beast:
Ending the Love/Hate Relationship Between Girls and their Bodies

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ISBN: 978-0-9739717-5-0

Printed and bound in Canada by
Blitzprint Inc., Calgary, Alberta

Editors: Angela Franco, Megan Aldwinckle, Kristin Eberhardt, Amanda Gretzan,
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www.tiberiouspublishing.com

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Ryland, Megan, 1990-

Beauty and the beast : ending the love/hate relationship between girls
and their bodies / Megan Ryland.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-9739717-5-0

1. Body image—Juvenile literature. 2. Body image in adolescence—
Juvenile literature. 3. Teenage girls—Psychology--Juvenile literature. 4. Self-esteem in
adolescence—Juvenile literature. I. Title.

BF724.3.B55R94 2008

j155.5'33

C2008-906002-4

Acknowledgements

A novel begins with one person, but it cannot succeed without the help of others. Many people have been involved in the publishing of *Beauty and the Beast*. From the first editor, Angela Franco, to the last, everyone was important and improved the manuscript. Thanks to Megan Aldwinckle, Kristin Eberhardt, Amanda Gretzan, Ben Rowe, Brittany Pittman, Lauren LaPointe, Rosy Lee and Marlene Ponjavic for helping to edit and revise the book, as well as all those who provided valuable feedback. Of course, without the support of Dale Wallace and Warren Ferguson in the Lord Beaverbrook High School Creative Writing program, this entire project would have been impossible. Many thanks are owed to them for all their work. The cover was done by Melissa Chow, under the expert guidance of Kevin Henderson, who was a great help in putting this book together. I greatly appreciate Melissa's work and couldn't have asked for more. The chapter-by-chapter photography was done by Gary Groeneveld and the author picture was taken by Katie Mraz. Mr. Groeneveld was very patient with my strange requests and all my models were spectacular, and so thanks as well to (in order of appearance) Sepidar, Anisha, Megan, Hannah, Chrissy, Kiara, Melissa, Jessie and Amy. Thanks also go to Joanne Biegun for her contribution to the book. A special thank you goes to all the girls who answered my survey. There have been so many people who've supported this book that someone has probably been missed, but I appreciate all of it. I couldn't have done it without you.



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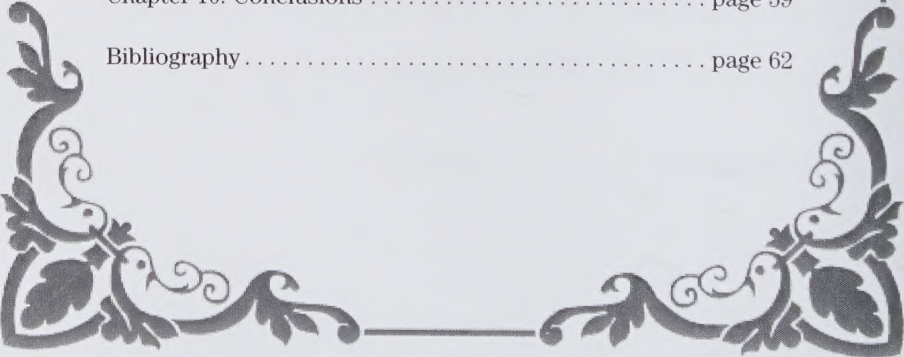
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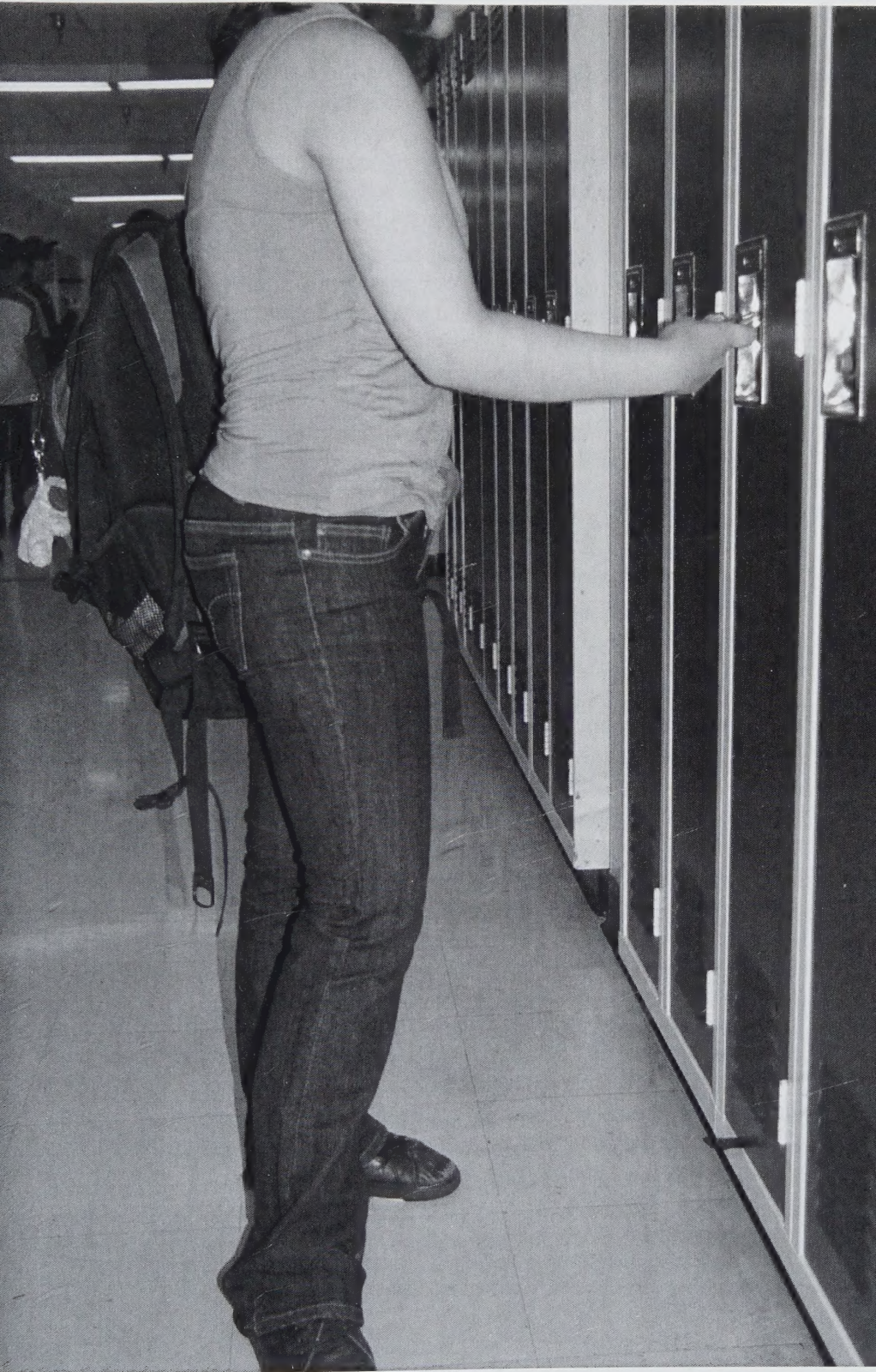
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Chapter 1: An Introduction

"You are so *fat*!" My sister spat the words at me, as if this were the worst possible thing. As if being fat were worse than being stupid, worse than being cruel, worse than being racist, worse than being a liar or a thief; worse than all of these qualities combined.

Wait a second. Back up; rewind. *Fat* is supposed to be insulting? It's the worst insult she can come up with in the middle of a fight? It suddenly hit me: there's something seriously wrong with that.

If I hadn't already been concerned with how teenage girls think about themselves and each other, then this would have been enough to spark an interest. The arsenal of cruelty among girls, especially siblings, usually attacks the most vulnerable part of a person's self esteem: the appearance. It's the easiest target, as everything is out in the open for everyone to see.

In doing research for this book, I wrote and distributed a survey to a hundred girls at my school in Calgary, Alberta. Lord Beaverbrook High School students, from grades ten to twelve, answered about forty-five questions¹ ranging from the personal to purely innocent. The results were interesting to say the least.

My suspicions were confirmed when I learned that 61% of the girls surveyed agreed that being called fat was worse than being called stupid. Apparently, another person attacking your appearance (specifically your height to weight ratio) is much worse than your mental competence. Perhaps this stems from the fact that there are few opportunities to be told that you're beautiful, but many chances to prove to yourself, and to others, that you aren't stupid. This makes it much easier to believe that you're fat than that you're dumb.

Of course, my next question is, wouldn't you rather be fat than stupid anyway? I can safely assume the answer is no, at least for

¹ Girls participating in the survey did not answer every question I posed, and so you will notice that there are decimal results.

roughly 61% of the girls I talked to. If it's more hurtful to be called fat, then it's also probably considered less shameful (i.e. better) to be thought of as stupid in comparison. We have a problem here.

The idea that girls are expected to be pretty – although not necessarily smart – may factor into this somewhere. It seems that intelligence still hasn't overtaken appearance as a key part of what makes up the ideal female in some minds. This expectation of beauty, this standard, has its own weight and it's felt by most the girls in my survey. Three quarters of the girls felt a pressure to have a different body in some way; they felt that they were falling short of an expectation. This isn't news. Today's standards have strayed far from the achievable, not that it stops many girls from trying.

The effort expended to fulfill society's demands of perfection takes time; hours each day are spent attempting to fit the mould. Why does it take some girls so long to get ready to go out? They need to be prepared to step onto the stage at any time. Most girls know that people will be watching and they dress to please a certain crowd. What girl hasn't considered, at least for a moment, what the other kids at school are going to think of an outfit? Hair, makeup and clothes are all expected to follow a certain guideline, which is usually defined by what label you've been plastered with over the course of your life. But every label eventually falls under the category of Girl, and that's when things get truly interesting.

Society's idea of perfection of the female form is almost laughable; at least, it would be if it weren't quite so oppressive. It's a cross between a model, a celebrity and a porn star. The perfect woman would be toned without a spec of fat on her body, have flawless skin, big breasts, hair that was always shiny and well-behaved, and white, straight teeth. Most likely, she would be neither "too short" nor "too tall"; none of her features would be disproportionate or unsymmetrical and she would probably be waxed within an inch of her life. If this sounds a bit familiar, you may be experiencing a flashback from your childhood.

Barbie™, Mattel's plastic darling, is the most obvious example of Western culture's outrageous ideas about girls' bodies. Blown up to life-sized proportions, Barbie™ is an estimated 5 feet, 9 inches and weighs about 110 lb. Her bust-waist-hip measurements are said to be about 39-18-33, while the average American woman's measurements are 35-28-38. Don't forget, Barbie's™ feet would be only a size three, making it impossible to walk. Also, scientists have concluded that a real-life Barbie™ could not support the weight of her upper body and a

torso that small couldn't contain the necessary organs and intestines to support life.² In short, Barbie™ is impossible by any human definition. And yet, this is the toy that many girls are most familiar with. Sure, we can't expect dolls to be realistic, but I think we should be asking more from society's standards.

Every day, girls collect ideas and pass them on – ideas about beauty, acceptance, self-esteem, judgement, ourselves and each other. Essentially, we participate in our culture and learn what is expected. Often, participating in North American society means rejecting some things, images and people, while embracing or idolizing others. Much of what we reject is ourselves, and that self-hate is also an idea taught to girls every day by society and the media.

When I say "society" is teaching us something, I don't mean the faceless, shifting concept. I'm talking about your classmates, parents, friends, cousins and even the stranger sitting next to you on the bus. Everyone makes up how we experience and perceive the standards of our culture. Most of the time, people who are close to us have a large impact on what we believe, and this can be positive or negative. Of course, this is not the only influence on our ideas of beauty.

Everyone comes in contact with the media, making it a powerful force. The media is where we get information and how we are entertained. The term encompasses newspapers, magazines, radio shows, music, the internet, television, and movies, and all of these forms have advertising. For a variety of reasons, including the fact that avoiding all media would be extremely difficult and probably not in our own best interest, we put up with the advertisements. However, the media is a partner in the business of determining society's standards, and there are many occasions when the influence isn't positive.

For example, dieting commercials don't exactly encourage a viewer to feel good about herself; that's not what would sell their product. The subtle messages are there, even if it's just a subtext of "you're not good enough" implied in most advertisements.

Luckily, in an age where mainstream media is focused on the rich, the famous and the thin, there are positive influences as well. Parents, friends, teachers and organizations are all able to fight back against the ideas that undermine self-respect and acceptance. When I asked those in my survey if they felt beautiful, an encouraging 59.6%

² (Coopersmith, 2006)

answered yes. Of course, that also means that 40.4% of the girls surveyed said no.

An estimated 0.5-4% of women will have anorexia nervosa during their lifetime, while bulimia nervosa will afflict 1-4%³. These clinical eating disorders are not the whole story, however. We've all heard about eating disorders by now, but just because a girl is unhappy with her appearance doesn't mean that she's going to starve herself to death or throw up after every meal. Body dissatisfaction is most often much more subtle than that. It appears in the small ways, like not wanting to be seen in a bathing suit, or a lack of confidence. Just over half (56.6%) of the girls surveyed said that they weren't satisfied with their current body and 59.2% agreed that they would be happier if they were thinner. Does thin equal happy? Does thin equal beautiful? What strange math class have we been in that these are the equations we have learned? Thin is just an adjective that we've given too much importance.

I believe that beauty should be defined as something different, something separate from what the media, advertisers and society are pushing at us. It's not a narrow vision of a single feature or body part; it's the entire package, inside and out, put together in a new way. There's more to feeling attractive than just a pretty face. Essentially, feeling beautiful is loving oneself, and accepting who and what you are.

I want to spread this definition. Beauty is something that comes from you, not something that is given or taken away by anyone else. You can decide to think and feel differently. Girls tend to be social creatures and too often allow others to define who they are; in the process, they give the people around them the power to decide how they should feel about themselves. I want to take a stand, even in a small way, against those who would like me to feel bad about myself and to take back my power to define who I am – or even choose to be undefined – and I *can*. Writing this book is my way of inviting others to stand with me by sharing knowledge and offering different ideas from what the mainstream media is handing out.

**Beauty is
something that
comes from you,
not something
that is given or
taken away by
anyone else.**

³ (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2002)

I am by no means the only voice calling for change. It's everywhere, from our friends to our doctors, and there are many resources available to get more information. Knowledge *can* be power, and I've put together a bibliography at the end of the book; these sources can be a good place to start if you're looking for more information. There are organizations, websites, books and documentaries all focused on the identity of women, unsurprisingly since we do make up about 51% of the population. We've got the numbers, but it's up to us to make the change.

A teenage girl's body is made up of the usual parts – arms, legs, eyes, ears – but these days it's also made up of a mishmash of cultural ideals, fad diets, genetics, identity and whatever else she manages to pick up on a daily basis. Positive and negative influences pop up everywhere, but they *can* be sorted out into what's "me," versus "them." Real and "ideal." Beauty and the Beast.

Part One

The Obsession



Chapter 2: Obsessed

North American society is obsessed. It is obsessed with dieting and fitness and low-calorie, non-fat, sugar-free food. It is saturated with thoughts about image, appearance, beauty, health, comparisons, fashion and status. In a way, society has an eating disorder; an unhealthy preoccupation and relationship with food, exercise and weight that influences everything. North America's fixation on appearance is reinforced at almost every turn and there's no question as to why girls have internalized this focus on the outside.

The dieting industry is making fifty billion dollars a year,⁴ and it's not surprising. Bookstores are always well-stocked with paperbacks describing ways to sculpt, tone, flatten, and thin your body. Talk shows cover the subject extensively, and the nightly news seems to be able to find spare moments to remind us a few more times that North America is too fat. No one seems to be measuring up or scaling down quite enough.

The prevalence of obesity is often called an epidemic by the media and the experts they consult. If the last headline used the word "Epidemic," it's easily substituted with "Plague," "Outbreak" or another dramatic noun. It is true that in 2004, Statistics Canada announced that 26% of 12 to 17-year-old girls were overweight or obese; it is also true that the numbers have been increasing rather dramatically over the last twenty-five years. In the United States, the numbers are higher; for example, in a survey from 1999-2002, the same age group (12-17) is nearly twice as likely to be obese.⁵

However, the prominence of dieting, fitness and the importance of weight loss has arguably risen during that time as well. It only makes sense that programs, groups and cookbooks would be created to play into the growing focus and issues of North American society, supplying – as well as creating – the demand. Every form of

⁴ (Coopersmith, 2006)

⁵ (Shields, 2005)

media invented has preached the wonders of being thin and how we can do it, and yet our focus on waist size hasn't been doing much good to curb the appetite of those at risk for the health complications associated with obesity.

There are people who are getting thinner though. The prevalence of eating disorders is estimated to be increasing along with obesity; our society's taste for extremes is clear in the shapes our bodies take. Some people seem to be acting on the message that "thin is best" but they aren't any better off for it.

There was a time when self-improvement didn't mean going on a diet. In the days of the corset, when most of the female body was hidden away, character and virtue were important, while qualities like vanity or self-absorption were considered unattractive. I'm not suggesting that we return to an era where women had very few rights, but that we borrow some ideas about the role that appearance should have in our lives. Self-absorption is nearly a requirement now in order to look your best at all times; it's a consuming task and some people spend more than an hour looking at their reflection every day, trying to achieve the perfect hair, makeup and outfit.

Imagine a world where you had never looked in a mirror. If you didn't know what you looked like, if you weren't constantly reminded of your appearance, would that change how you related to yourself? Who has never stood in front of a mirror and found flaws? A great deal of our self-critical behaviour requires a mirror and without one, perhaps many people would be better off.

There's more than one type of mirror; cultural mirrors such as movies, television and magazines hold up a reflection of ideals. If we didn't want people to look like movie stars, why would we put them in feature films, television shows, or all over our magazines? We seem to have the idea that this is how we should look, and how everyone *can* look, but that's not true. Not everyone can or should look like a movie star! For a many people, it's plain unhealthy to look like those we see in the media.

Still, as we stand in front of mirrors everyday, a lot of us unconsciously compare ourselves to those we see as beautiful. We immediately notice what's "wrong" and what doesn't fit with the ideal, while often seemingly ignoring positive attributes. Comparisons bother some people more than others, but most girls are very aware that they don't match the many pictures of women they see around them.

It's been calculated that kids see about 40,000 commercials on television a year⁶ and, from personal experience, one can gather that most ads include at least one glance of a woman. What kind of a woman is shown? Not one that you would see everyday; she certainly doesn't look like your mother, a lady you would see shopping at Safeway, or a female teacher. She's an actress or a model and, with the help of a few clicks of a mouse, she is flawless.

How many adult women do you think you interact with on a daily basis compared to how many you see on television? When 40,000 commercials are divided amongst the days of the year, it comes out at about 110 ads per day. That's up to 110 airbrushed women, not even including those you see on shows and in magazines or movies. You probably don't meet that many people in a single day. This means that you are likely seeing more women who are retouched models than real women. Therefore, the average female (the norm) in people's minds becomes the distorted image of the ladies seen in the media. This exception becomes the rule, or the standard.

Never in western culture has so much of the human body been on display, or put under so much scrutiny.

Never in western culture has so much of the human body been on display, or put under so much scrutiny; today, there is a standard for every body part. As skirts became shorter and shorter, more and more of a woman's body was expected to look a certain way. If no one was going to see your abs, would you be quite so concerned with having a six-pack? Probably not.

The bikini is likely the least amount of clothing you could wear without being completely naked, but it is the new corset. Our relatively new acceptance of the nearly-naked female form often isn't freeing so much as adding another way for women to obsess about appearance. Instead of the visible restraint of the corset, we have the invisible standard looming over our heads; it's the beast in the background. The beach body, one that is bikini-ready, requires us to shape every body part to fit within the rules society has created.

Unfortunately, we live in a time when image is everything. Beauty and sex appeal are often rewarded, while stepping outside the ideal is ignored or even punished. Boys ask out the pretty girls, while

⁶ (Wilcox, Cantor, Dowrick, Kunkel, Linn, & Palmer, 2004)

those left behind watch with envy. Socially, it's an advantage to be attractive; that's an accepted concept. The "ugly" teens are usually social outcasts and, as a group that's generally looking for some sort of acceptance, teenagers notice this pattern instinctively. We don't stop and think, "I better be pretty or no one will like me," but we do pick up on society's signals that conforming to ideals of beauty will likely ease our travel on the road of life. It's a survival thing. So most of us conform, at least a little, to what we believe society wants from us because it gets us what we want (acceptance) and keeps us from being rejected by our peers.

Conformity doesn't give us acceptance from ourselves though; we reject ourselves so that those around us will not. Society's obsession with an ideal requires that we criticize ourselves before others have the chance, because then we can catch a mistake before someone else notices.

Great. I'm supposed to give up my love for myself so that I can earn the respect of others? Hate myself, so that others don't hate me? But I spend so much more time with myself than I do with other people. When I'm alone, I have to live with who I am; I have to do battle with the person that I am and the person that I'm expected to be.

That is what this obsession with perfection does; it creates a war. For some people, those who aren't too concerned with their appearance, this war takes place in a distant country and only comes to the forefront when something especially tragic happens. Others live their lives on the front line in a constant fight to keep from being taken over by enemy forces. A few are taken hostage by this idea, and some don't make it home.

Would our current idea of beauty still be considered gorgeous if everyone looked like the airbrushed pictures all the time? I doubt it. The effect would likely be creepy. Very few people are naturally that thin and no one is naturally flawless. It takes a lot of effort and chemical product to keep up a perfect appearance, so very few people take the time and money to do it. If every single woman in the world was dedicated to her appearance, where would we be? The beauty industry would be rejoicing, but it's doubtful many women would be very productive. For example, to perform CPR you have to stop worrying about your lipstick, and painting a masterpiece tends to be messy; you can't let life pass you by just because it might cause grass stains. It's clear that in order to function to the best of her ability, there is a point when a girl has to make appearance less of a priority.

To be obsessed is a powerful state of mind; it dominates everything else, pushing even the most important ideas into the background. Everything becomes secondary when all you can think about is your obsession, and that's what makes it dangerous. This is the Beast in our society, a monster that's out of control and looming in the minds of many. The dream of beauty has become a nightmare as the Beast stalks us from the shadows, hiding in our mirrors and our media, but – like in the fairy tale – we can find a happy ending. We need to accept this irrational idea of perfection as an issue and address it by refusing to conform to the definition and becoming committed to loving ourselves. It's definitely not easy, but we need to remember what is important.

Fighting back can begin with small things. First, make loving yourself as important as looking good and break the bad habit of ignoring all the positive aspects of who you are. Catch yourself when you make a negative comment about yourself or another person, and instead try to find the things you like or admire. It's a significant change that can shift your perspective if you stick with it. This could start as a challenge to uncover a compliment for everyone, and it may feel silly or arrogant to acknowledge good things about yourself but it's important to be able to identify positive qualities.

When possible, you could also watch television shows or movies that include some actors and actresses who don't quite fit the mould of what people are expected to look like; it's a quiet kind of rebellion against messages that the media projects. Maybe you could take another look at the magazines you read and consider how they portray beauty. It may turn out that you don't like what you see when you observe with more objective eyes.

If you don't allow yourself to be obsessed, then you've won against a society of millions of people who are. The battle of "You vs. Them" is a hard fight, but if people stand together, it can be "Us vs. Them." Obsessions can fade with time until it's just Us. No airbrushing required.



Chapter 3: Changing Uniform

Have you ever seen a picture of a model with a bruise or a cut where the razor slipped? I wait for the day that the caption at the bottom of an advertisement in a magazine reads: “Kimberly Hanson, model above, slipped down the stairs on the morning of the photo shoot and now her knee is half purple. We apologize for this dose of reality.” It wouldn’t happen. That’s what makeup, flattering angles and retouching are for. Already our apparent ideal breaks ranks with reality.

The difference isn’t only between pictures and real life. Our bodies tell our stories, and each one is unique. One ideal doesn’t make allowances for this uniqueness. Among girls who are similar there are still vast differences; even siblings differ in eye or hair color, build and skin tone. Millions of different things make up our appearance and who we are, from genetics, to experiences, to personality, and every one of those aspects separates us from the standard.

Your DNA determines – among other things – what your body looks like, and it’s unique unless you happen to be an identical twin or a clone. You probably know that genes determine many things, including height, metabolism speed and what your healthiest weight may be. The moment you’re born, your appearance is – at least in part – predetermined. If you’re short, society’s definition of beauty at five feet, seven inches tall will never make sense for you because there’s nothing you can do to change how you’re built. That’s okay, because it doesn’t need to define you.

A single body type for an entire culture to strive for not only leaves much unexplored, but also sets everyone up for failure. We can’t even look like each other, never mind attaining “perfection.”

My friend Melissa and I aren’t identical twins, and though we do have a lot in common, we are separated by genes, history and personal habits. This means that, while we may compare bruises, other comparisons between us are rather pointless because we’re each a product of our own lives.

Melissa plays soccer twice a week, loves to swim and rarely sleeps in. Her favourite food is french fries, but her mother forces a

healthy diet on her daily, and she still has a slight love affair with Winnie the Pooh at sixteen years old.

On the other hand, while I do play soccer as well, I hate to swim, try to take weekly trips to the gym, and my favourite food alternates between lasagne and ice cream. Also, I'm constantly stressed out about something or other, which may explain my dirty habit of biting my nails.

Taking even this snapshot of our lives into account, it wouldn't make sense if Melissa and I looked the same. We eat different foods, do different things and have different habits; all of these aspects and more shape our appearance. Furthermore, does it make any sense for us to change who we are and how we live so that we can be like clones? Is there any reason whatsoever that we should strive for the same body? Of course not.

Let's look at it another way. You have two buckets of paint. One is blue and one is yellow. If you mix $\frac{2}{3}$ blue and $\frac{1}{3}$ yellow, you're going to get a bluish green. Mix the opposite ratio, $\frac{1}{3}$ blue and $\frac{2}{3}$ yellow, and you will get a yellowish green. You would never expect for those two different combinations, those two different ratios of paint, to come together to make forest green. It's just not logical, right? How can we then expect to take two people with different qualities and end up with the same result?

Everyone is different inside and, logically, should be different outside. Anything else would just be strange. A single standard for beauty is so very ignorant of the fact that there is not a single, standard human being.

The idea that clothing represents your personality is not foreign; everyone knows that wearing all black will make people think of you differently than if you sport a pink sweater set. The concept that our bodies represent our inner selves, however, seems to be much less common.

Your body tracks your history pretty well. That scar on your knee from when you were six will always be there, and it may not be pretty, but it's a part of you and how you've lived your life (at times, recklessly). The mark from when your sister pushed you into a glass table? You can always guilt her with it. Cuts, scratches, wrinkles, they all tell our stories and separate us from the masses. Events in your life leave marks in many ways, and without them we would be drastically different.

We often look at our bodies as separate things, as objects to be shaped and changed, not as a continuation of our personality or

representation of our history, but our bodies *are* part of who we are. Appearance is not the most important aspect of you, but we seem to be ignoring how amazing our bodies are and focusing instead on what we wish they were. Your body works with and for you; it helps you get through your day and punishes you when you do something stupid. It's not always in your control, but it's always *you*. People will routinely say, "I hate my thighs," but they don't seem to recognize that their thighs are part of them; they are really saying "I hate myself." Don't look at yourself like a collection of body parts, but a whole that is connected to who you are.

**They are
really saying
"I hate
myself."**

Your body is the only representation that your personality has to show the outside world, and it's the only body you're going to get. You probably (hopefully) have qualities that you like or are proud of; maybe you're funny, or smart, or friendly – everyone is *something*, whether they'll admit it or not. Think of your body as another important quality, although not the *most* important. It is unique to you, expressing who you are in a way that no one else can replicate.

Everyone is different, some a little more of a different shade or a little less, and that diversity creates interest. Don't let anyone tell you the lie that there's only one way to be beautiful. Your body isn't just skin, bone, muscle and fat; it's part of who you are as a person and deserves respect.



Chapter 4: The Cat is Out of the Bag

We hear the word “love” thrown around a lot. The emotion is very important to our society, inspiring millions of songs and thousands of plotlines, but it gets applied to almost everything. “I love chocolate!” or, “I love puppies” (because, let’s face it, who doesn’t?) or maybe just, “I love that shirt.” But we don’t hear quite the same thing with beauty. Why can’t we tell others that they’re beautiful? Or, better yet, ourselves? And not just when we’re dressed up, but whenever. Wouldn’t it be nice if we recognized the “ordinary,” intrinsic beauty that everyone possesses?

Unfortunately, we don’t. In fact, we usually pounce on weaknesses instead, embodying the Beast. Girls are infamous for cat fighting, vicious words and rumours. Boys often fight and get over it, while girls are usually emotional bullies who hold grudges. Social structure within groups of girls is established much more strictly and that raises the stakes during interactions; the clique hierarchy can create situations where a girl feels that one wrong move can put many friendships on the line. It also often creates competition among us, which can get pretty dirty. Some girls will say anything about anyone, and picking apart someone’s appearance is the easiest type of criticism. It doesn’t require someone to get to know you and it’s all pretty subjective. Eroding someone’s self-esteem becomes simple if they aren’t confident in their appearance, and this is the case with many girls.

Most girls don’t really think about what they’re doing as they tear someone else down, and perhaps wouldn’t even call their actions bullying, but the negative effect on the victim is there nonetheless. In some cases, remarks are meant as jokes, but in others the intent is certainly to hurt; there is no way to claim otherwise. However, I don’t think girls completely understand the impact they could be making.

When I surveyed high school girls, 87.1% said that they had received negative comments about their appearance, which didn’t come as a surprise. What I was curious about was whether or not girls thought that changing their appearance would really stop the comments; do we honestly believe that a certain waist size would let us avoid insults? Just over half the girls (56.7%) said no, and I’m

inclined to agree. I don't think there is a change possible that could cover the wide range of flaws girls find in each other. If it's not one thing wrong, then it's another. Besides, insults don't have to have any basis to be said and sometimes it's not about what we look like, but finding a way to bring someone down a notch. Girls will be girls, right? Wrong.

Of those surveyed, 88.8% agreed that negative comments can change the way you think about yourself. Harsh words can change what you see in the mirror and the level of respect you have for your body and yourself. If you are repeatedly told that you are ugly, it takes a lot of positive reinforcement from other people and other parts of your life to make up for it. Many girls (specifically 60.6%) say that

**Not everyone
seems to agree
that all women
are equal to other
women.**

they take negative comments into account at times, altering the way they dress or the way they relate to their bodies in response to the words of others and essentially repressing their individuality. Of course, it's definitely not just our female peers that are putting us down, but shouldn't they be the ones supporting us? We're in this together, right?

Feminism is rightfully described as a belief in social, political and economic equality for women, but it is an idea that is often applied differently for each person. The great majority of women in Western culture believe that women are equal to men, but not everyone seems to agree that all women are equal to other women. We see this in action when girls create a social hierarchy that gives some people more value than others. It's time for a different type of feminism, and a different kind of equality to start emerging. We need some small level of solidarity amongst girls, a commitment to recognizing our common ties. To do this, we must stop spreading the idea of self-hate.

We constantly perpetuate ideas about the body by using the current standardized beauty as a measure for those around us. All but four of the girls I surveyed admitted that they felt others judged them by their appearance; that means that 96% believed that the people around them were making snap judgements about who they were based solely on their exterior.

When a product gains popularity and recognition by customers spreading the word, advertisers call it viral marketing. The concept of word-of-mouth advertising is well known and it tends to

work because people trust their friends. Ideas can be marketed as well, and we sell each other concepts all the time. Every day, girls take part in an advertising campaign when they judge each other and comment to their friends, giving the beauty ideal more and more power.

As well, in various cliques girls bad-mouth themselves, and when it's accepted it teaches everyone present what the standard of beauty and self-hate is. Eighty-one percent of girls surveyed said that they talked about their bodies with friends, and of those girls, the majority admitted that the comments made were usually negative.

Everyone has seen it happen at one time or another. One girl will start it by looking in the mirror and saying, "I feel so fat today," and then another will agree but add something else like, "and my hair is completely flat." If there's a third girl, it's likely that she'll pipe up with, "Hey, at least it's just your hair that's flat..." Laughter probably follows some of these discussions, but they aren't exactly building a positive body image. They're establishing that, as a form of bonding, you have to be hard on yourself; self-loathing leads to acceptance. The girls in this situation have been "sold" an idea of beauty and the expectation of self-criticism that comes with it. Anyone eavesdropping on the conversation is really overhearing an advertisement and is being sold the concept as well, unless they realize what's really going on and refuse to buy into it.

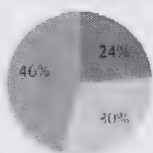
This commercial doesn't just play out between friends. Cruel remarks from rivals, acquaintances, enemies, or even strangers reinforce this brand of thinking by punishing those who haven't been bought out. Boys can be great beauty salesmen if a girl happens to overhear a guy she likes insulting her appearance. This can work conversely; if a boy compliments a girl on how thin she is, she may work harder to achieve the positive attention. In both scenarios, the overall outcome is a negative shift in a girl's relationship with her body.

Clearly, peers hold a lot of power in a teenager's world, but family can get the message of standardized beauty across too. How many times have you seen your mother scowl at herself in the mirror because she doesn't like what she sees, or heard her mention that she needs to lose weight? Every time a girl sees her mother – usually her first female role model – be overly critical of her appearance, she learns that this is how she should relate to her own body. Exactly half of the girls reported that their parents went on diets and, if they did, 97.9% of the time the mother dieted (compared to how often fathers dieted: 37.8%). Of course it's important for our parents to stay in shape and eat healthy (for their own good and as a model for their children), but fad

diets, programs and pills can find their way into the house as parental weight-loss strategies and influence others in the household. However, it's the comments that sometimes count more than the dieting does, because when a parent endorses the ideals of standardized beauty, they sell them to the next generation. A mother is an example for her daughter, and it's hard to be a good one in today's society, as parents have often been sold the same definition of beauty that society is hawking today.

Which is Most Hurtful?

- Comments from family members
- Comments from peers
- Both are equally hurtful



outfits with her eyes.

Most people are familiar with the feeling of having someone pass judgement on them without a word. When you walk into a room, it can feel like you're at the Olympics, waiting for the judges to announce your scores. There is usually at least one person in every girl's life that has the special skill of silently letting her know that she must have gotten dressed in the dark and shouldn't have had a second helping the night before. When that person is someone unavoidable, like a family member or a person in your social circle (who I won't call a friend), it's daily torture.

What they are doing is selling you an idea of how you should look. This is viral marketing at its best, because it's free and it gets you every day from all directions. Fortunately, you don't have to buy it. You can't change the channel or turn off the radio like normal commercials, but you can at least spot it when an advertisement for unhealthy body image is shoved into your face. You can reject it, too. Teenagers now are more cynical about advertising than any other generation, so catch these ads as they happen and ignore them.

Obviously ignoring cruel comments isn't easy all the time. There's a significant difference between dismissing a stupid remark from your local jerk and a comment by someone whose opinion you

When it comes to cruel remarks, siblings, especially, can be killers. According to the survey, many girls believe that negative comments are equally hurtful from family members as from peers. Personally, there are few people who can slash through my defences like my little sister. Her comments about weight bounce right off me, but I can feel her pick apart my

value. This is why it's important to have strong self-esteem and to surround yourself with people who will support you.

However, one thing that is always in your control is what you sell. Are you taking standardized beauty and advertising it to all your friends? It happens without you noticing, but suddenly you're the one starting the conversation with, "I feel so fat" or, "I totally hate my thighs," and usually your friends will join in. All of a sudden, everyone in the group is more self-conscious.

Perhaps you're in a different situation. Maybe you and your friends are standing at the sinks in the bathroom and another girl washes her hands and leaves; as soon as the door swings closed behind her, you can't resist mentioning how heavy the girl is. You tell yourself that she didn't hear you, so there's no harm done, but it's a lie. You just told all your friends how you think girls should look, and what happens when you don't conform.

Have you ever been the girl? The one who other people talked about as soon as you left the room? Probably, and you can usually tell when you're about to be talked about as soon as you're out of ear shot. It's a gross feeling when everyone in the room seems to be looking at you like you have something on your face. So, if you know when the other girls will talk about you, what's the probability that whoever you talk about doesn't at least suspect what's going to happen? There's also gossip to consider. Some way, somehow, your message will be delivered.

It's time to change the product that we're peddling. When someone mentions feeling fat, perhaps you could point out that *fat is not a feeling*. Maybe, instead of continuing the conversation of criticism, dispute the comment or rebut it. Try, "Stop fishing for compliments. We all know you're hot." It won't change things right away, but it'll be one less conversation to have about how unattractive you think you are; in this case, less is more.

The cattiness needs to end. It's time to take back your power to be kind and use it. See the beauty that's there and stop evaluating others using a standard that they can't possibly meet; what does it matter what dress size the girl who sits in front of you in math class wears? We need to put beautiful back into our vocabulary.

Part Two

Commercial Reality



Chapter 5: What Sells

I like to watch infomercials. I admit it. When there's nothing on during the week or a Sunday afternoon, I don't mind letting my brain melt a little by listening to obviously faked enthusiasm about the next best product. There's something soothing about the way that advertisers reduce life to a desire for a single invention or service.

Infomercials follow a comfortable formula; they introduce a host and usually an expert, who act like old friends. Then they bring out the product, which they assure you is superior to any other comparable device on the market *and* less expensive. Viewers are shown exactly how well the item works, how easy it is, and it's likely explained how the product came to be invented. In the middle, there may be a poorly-acted, black and white clip of someone attempting to do the same job without the help of their product, and the sense of frustration is clear. Who hasn't seen the woman cut a tomato with a "regular" knife? They then compare that scenario with the ease and convenience of their device. If that wasn't enough to convince you, they throw in free merchandise as added incentive and perhaps drop one payment.

Throughout this they mention that the product or device will help change your life. Dinner can be made faster, and carpets can be cleaned more easily. Each little innovation leading to a more efficient, relaxing lifestyle. Everything is simplified into the equation of a product plus you equals happiness. Sharp knives or a better grill, that's what we need to fix our lives, and with five easy payments it can be all ours. If that sounds warped, that's because it is. Life is far too complicated for our problems to be solved with a credit card, but we try.

Commercials offer us an alternate reality that is artificial but appealing. Advertisements are designed to create desires in potential consumers by pairing items with ideas, like happiness, relaxation or wealth. Brands are entire product identities that associate a particular good or service with a certain emotion or concept. Today's mass production of essentially identical goods makes it important for companies to distinguish products not with different qualities but

with unique ideas. We've heard about personification in English class, but when a company brands its product as happy or cool, they are giving the item qualities that it can't possibly possess. They are associating it with a value that is intangible and it only counts if the consumer believes it.

Appearance – specifically *keeping up* appearances – is a key idea in our current society, and so it comes as no surprise that beauty is an idea attached to many products and services. If it's not beauty, then it's something else, like luxury, success, freedom, love or fun, but there's usually a little dash of sex appeal somewhere in there. You hear “sex sells” everywhere but you don't hear people admit that beauty sells. When Naomi Wolfe (1990) wrote *The Beauty Myth*, the cosmetics industry made 20 billion dollars a year; they can't succeed like that by telling women that they're beautiful without makeup, perfect the way they are. Instead, they tie the idea of beauty to products.

Self-esteem sells too, but only because self-doubt buys. In many cases, advertisers profit from the doubts and fears of their customers. In the same way that a family probably won't purchase a house alarm if they have no fear of being robbed, women aren't likely to buy beauty products if they don't see a need.

The dieting industry is especially in need of creating dissatisfaction in their customers, because it's not a lot of fun to be on a diet. The nature of dieting is restricting and/or demanding in one way or another (no matter what the advertisements say) and that's not great inspiration to join a program. Makeup can at least be fun; starving yourself isn't. However, if a company can convince a girl that a diet is necessary, the girl is more likely to buy their special food or their videos.

When asked, 96% of the girls in my survey said that they had seen a Jenny Craig commercial, 95% had seen at least one for Weight Watchers and the same number had seen an LA Weight Loss advertisement. That's a pretty thorough advertising campaign. Most of these commercials include dramatic “success stories”; I put success stories in quotations because 90-95% of dieters don't keep the weight

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off long term and return to their former size⁷, so it's extremely likely that those "success" stories will again be shovelling money into the dieting industry. That's fine with the diet companies.

Children and teenagers are intimately acquainted with advertising. Recall the statistic that the average kid sees about 40 000 television commercials every year and it explains how we get to know advertising so well; the answer as to why is simple: profits. In 2001, there were 8 million people under twenty years old living in Canada and that's a big market. Kids and teenagers are close to the perfect customers, as they have spending money that isn't being eaten up by rent or other basics. They also have much more time on their hands with which to spend their extra cash.

It's not even just that we're buying things, although we definitely are; we're also influencing what our parents are buying. Think of all the things that your mom or dad wouldn't have bought unless you bothered them about it, or at least asked really nicely. Another appealing thing is that if companies persuade us to like their products now, we might develop what is called brand loyalty and use their product for the rest of our lives. We have power in our economy, and the advertisers want to use us to their advantage.

In order to do this, at least fifteen billion dollars of advertising is being thrown at kids a year, and to get to children these companies have to go through the media. Fortunately for these businesses, the media relies on commercials and ads to keep them up and running, so they're more than happy to be the liaison between the company and their consumers. For example, radio is a free source of entertainment or information, but it costs money to produce a radio show. Companies pay radio stations to play commercials in between songs, and this little transaction keeps the music playing. Television stations work the same way; just as they deliver the nightly news or a sitcom, they also flood us with brands. It's a trade off of sorts, but it does become a problem if certain news isn't reported on because of allegiance to advertisers⁸.

Of course, we all know advertisements are intended to sell products and we can ignore their claims, right? Well, not exactly. It's been reported that, until about the age of eight, kids don't realize that commercials are trying to persuade them to buy something⁹. That's

⁷ (Coopersmith, 2006)

⁸ For an astounding example, check out *The Corporation*, a documentary by Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbott and Joel Bakan.

⁹ (Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, 2004)

eight years where kids are watching thousands of commercials without any kind of critical thinking to filter out some of the deception. That's a great deal of time for companies to make their mark, and it also sets up advertising in people's minds as something trustworthy. We do, for the most part, learn differently later but many people have a problem with marketing to children.

So we've been brought up in an age of advertising and in a place where you can sell anything. How does this affect our bodies, our concept of beauty and the idea of self-worth? Poorly, as you can probably guess. Capitalizing on the insecurities of teens, and people in general, advertisers aim to stake a claim on our identity by branding their products as necessary and beneficial. They study demographics like scientists in a lab, funding research about who we are, what we need, and what we want. With that information, they can create products and advertising campaigns that cater exactly to our wishes and fears. They take our dreams – in many cases, our dreams of beauty – and package them up, selling it back to us in an artificial form and feeding the Beast. Lies sell too, unfortunately.

The truth is that we can't be made beautiful by their products, at least not in the way that counts. Maybe makeup can help us feel desirable temporarily, but the feeling doesn't last after we wash our faces at night. If you don't like what you see in the mirror, then when you finally take off the eye shadow, the skirt and the jewellery, you'll see the same thing and feel the same way.

It's time to start sorting out what's the idea (the brand image) and what's the product, and then using *that* information to make a decision. We may have believed advertisers when we were younger, but we know better now. An advertiser's job is to sell a product; okay, no harm done, as long as we don't make the mistake of buying the idea that it comes with.



Chapter 6: Reality (vs.) Television

It has been said that art imitates life; in theory, movies and television – for example – should reflect the culture that creates them. These days, expecting a movie to reflect your life is like looking for truth in a funhouse mirror. Our cultural mirrors are cracked and warped like our ideals, because they are showing us a world that does not match our own. Nearly every single girl I asked agreed that most movies and television shows weren't realistic, so whose life is this art imitating? I think we've got it wrong.

Everyday, we spend hours watching unrealistic television but we hardly question it. It's like we've all been listening to the same song on repeat and now it's stuck in our heads. We go around humming it subconsciously; we can't seem to help it at this point.

Walk into a theatre, sit through the previews and opening credits, and you are greeted by the same chick flick. All the girls look the same, wear the same type of clothes, and do the same things that we've seen before. The ending is also predictable; the boy and the girl will get together, against all the odds. I'm not saying that I don't like happy endings (in fact, I insist on them) but I'm confused by the limited definition of a happy ending. Where's the variety in movies that is so present in real life? Where are the girls who don't belong in a strict group or stereotype, those who slip through the cracks between labels? Where are the girls who are happy to be single? In Hollywood, frizzy hair signals a makeover to come, not a character trait. Not only is diversity stifled in regards to styles, but ethnic, racial, religious and cultural differences are often ignored as well. Unfortunately, when you walk out of that theatre, you probably won't mention to your friends that every girl in the movie wore a size four unless you're also complaining about your own figure.

Not every movie is like this. When we ignore for a moment the movies that are directed specifically towards mainstream teenage girls (chick flicks, essentially), there's a chance for a different story; as more demographics are targeted, we get a glimpse of diversity. Why is this? Do the studios think that every teenage girl acts and looks like the actresses they feature in the movies directed at us? Maybe it's just what

they think we want, or what they think we wish for reality. The formula doesn't appear to be hurting them so far; no one seems to be loudly demanding more from their entertainment.

In truth, even if girls aren't looking for more realism, the movie makers should be asking more from themselves and their scripts. Unfortunately, movies and television shows are generally extremely expensive to produce and studios are unlikely to take the risk of showing reality if they may fall flat on their face. However, if they think there's a niche to fill, there's a chance that studios could be convinced to take a chance and choose a leading lady who doesn't have perfect skin, or doesn't end up with a boyfriend, or maybe even looks like the average girl.

It's not just movies that are flawed. We have the tendency to think that what we see on television is normal. Logically, we know that most of it is the hyper-dramatized version of unlikely events, but subconsciously we do accept a lot of their conventions. They are a giant ad for a certain way of life, complete with product placement. They skip over reality, inconveniences and anything that wouldn't increase their ratings; real life doesn't work that way. For example, teenagers don't get acne on television and after a woman has a baby, she goes back to looking exactly the way she did prior to the pregnancy without breaking a sweat. After seeing the same lives lived over and over again on screen, we begin to think that it's how things should be.

Of the girls surveyed, 94.8% didn't think that everyone should look like celebrities, and yet how many girls would turn down the chance to have the bodies that they see on screen? That is seen as desirable, the best case scenario. We want to be movie stars, and in a way it makes sense.

It's hard not to envy movie or television characters in the back of your mind. Girls on the big screen usually get a simple solution, a complete resolution, by the end of the story and it seems clear that that's it; the hard part is over and now it's happily ever after. When the credits begin and the lights come back up, do you ever wonder if – two weeks after the movie takes place – the main character is going to discover that her mother has cancer? Trouble seems to bunch together in real life, and as one problem is solved another rushes in to take its place. It would be comforting to know that, once you face and defeat one challenge, you'll never struggle again in your life. Ha! In reality, the unit final you've been dreading is followed by face-planting in front of your crush, after which your ex walks by with his new flame. Then,

you get home and realize that your younger sibling went through your closet and found your old diary; plus, you need to bathe your cat. After all that, you have to wake up the next morning and face whatever else gets thrown at you.

What's more, as you turn off the television, you usually have faith that things will be resolved in time, probably by the next episode. That same faith is harder to find in real life; personally, I know that it's sometimes difficult to see how my problems will ever work out at all. So, not only is the girl on screen prettier than me – and pretty in the “right” way – but her life is just simply better than mine.

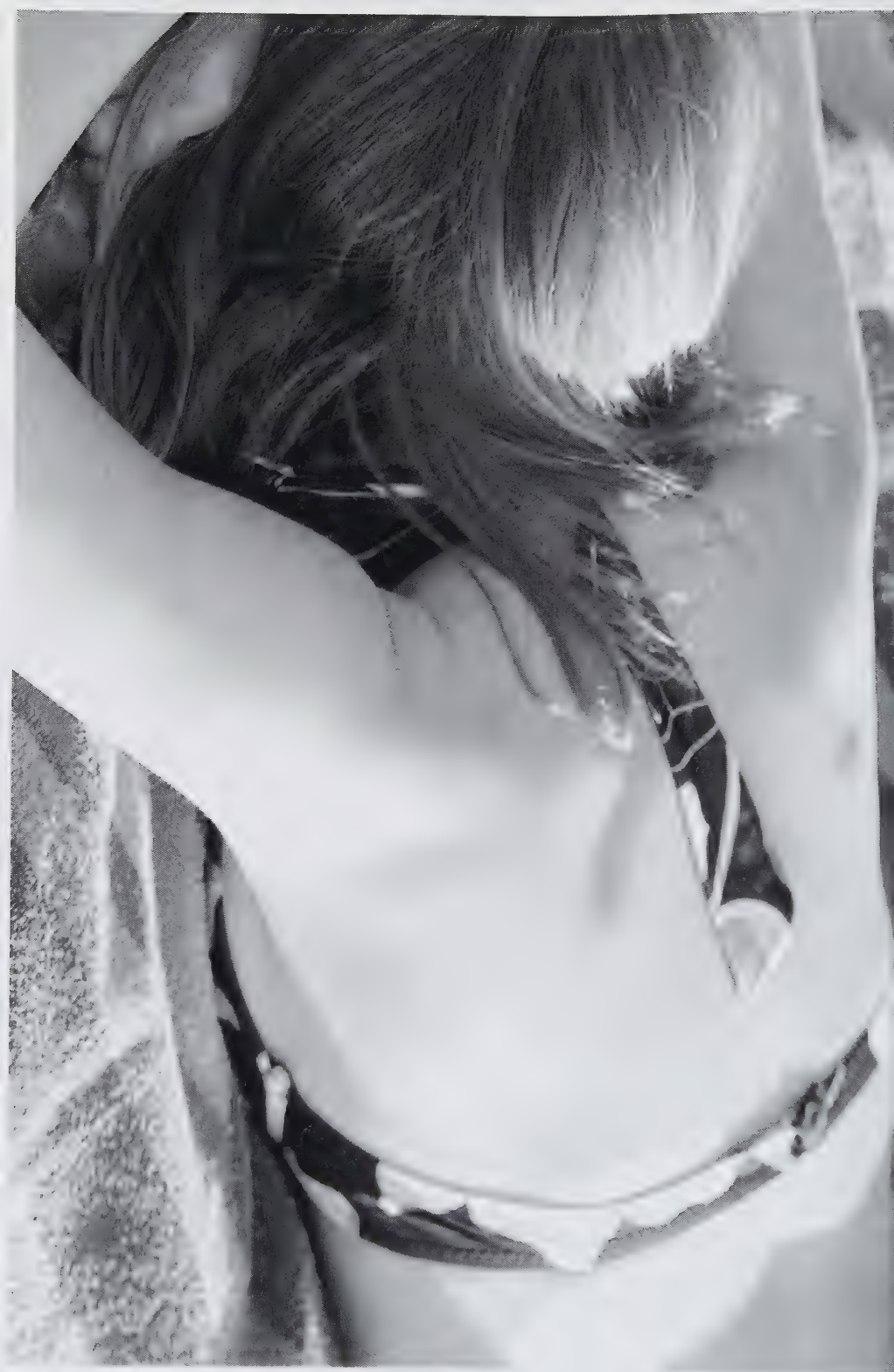
Movies and shows seem to be saying to us, “Pretty people are happy.” A girl could begin to wonder if she could become happy by looking like those she sees on screen. It's not something that usually happens consciously, but the thought gets in there; that melody gets stuck in your head. But it's time to skip to the next song.

Despite the fact that 69% of female television characters are considered thin (compared to the measly 5% that are overweight), that's not reflective of humanity as a whole at all. The average American woman wears sizes twelve to fourteen, unlike the majority of women on television who tend to wear size four¹⁰. It would be a nice change to see accurate portrayals of women, instead of the less messy, prettier versions that we're shown.

We do see a few less-than-gorgeous girls on television or in movies, but any flaws usually become the central issue to be resolved during an episode. If a girl dresses badly or her hair is too curly, she gets a makeover and the topic of body satisfaction is never touched again. The only other option is that the trait becomes a joke or a plot device, used to the character's disadvantage. In real life, makeovers don't perform the magic that they do in the movies. It's all an act.

I'm definitely not suggesting that you stop watching movies and shows for the rest of your life, but it's important that we're conscious of the lack of reality on the screen. We have to realize that many aspects of what we see are abnormal and impossible; better yet, we should begin to ask for more from entertainment. If you don't agree with the message a film is sending out, feel free not to support it with your movie-going dollars. Our age group is often targeted for specific products and that sometimes means the studios listen to us, if we're loud enough. Just think how cool it would be to see yourself (or, at least, someone like you) up on the big screen for a change.

¹⁰ (Coopersmith, 2006)



Chapter 7: Star Power

It has been decided: celebrities are much more interesting than normal people. Their struggles are more important, more tragic and definitely newsworthy. We should look up to these figures, whose only reported accomplishment is often starring in a movie or show and fitting into a teeny, tiny dress. Celebrities are more valued than the rest of us, and worth more socially and financially than we could ever dream. They are our idols.

Or *not*. Forget everything I said above; forget everything the media has been telling you about superstars since you were little. It's not true. Acting is a job. Modeling is a job. Movies, music and fashion are industries like any other industry; it's a business, not a religion, so why the worship?

How do celebrities even impact our lives? Why are they deemed important? When I wake up in the morning, it's because my mom has told me that it's time to get out of bed. My day *begins* with her – which I think is pretty important – but I never learn about her life through the nightly news. The bus driver that gets me to school (usually on time) doesn't have paparazzi following her on her route. If my math teacher is going to have a baby, I don't hear about it in the latest issue of a magazine. These are the women who have the power to impact my life, not some movie star. Yet when Britney Spears gets a pedicure, we'll probably hear about it as if we're supposed to care.

All normal people go through struggles – and celebrities are just normal people – and yet, if you look a certain way and hold a certain job, your struggles are given more importance and value. No one takes pictures of me when I go to the grocery store, but that doesn't make me less interesting or valuable than the girls whose photos are worth cash. A nurse keeps a child healthy, a therapist talks someone out of suicide, a teacher gives her student confidence to succeed and there's a slim-to-none chance that anyone but those involved will notice. Aren't these actions far more important to society than portraying a hot dancer in the next big blockbuster? Celebrities have jobs that are different from most (and pay more than most) but

they are just jobs nonetheless. Underneath the makeup and the airbrushing, there is a person.

Like everyone else, celebrities are bombarded by standards as well. It's even worse for a model or an actress, as their careers essentially require them to embrace standardized beauty in order to be successful. This intensified pressure often has a strongly negative effect on the star, sometimes creating the need for extreme diets, boot camp fitness schedules and teams of stylists on stand-by. There is also the potential emotional and mental impact; the strain that standardized beauty puts on those not being constantly watched and followed by paparazzi could be multiplied by the celebrity culture and have greater influence on someone in the public eye. This is not only hard on them but, as we decide that celebrities are more important than other people, stars end up perpetuating the idea of a certain type of beauty being "right". The entire situation feeds on itself; society expects a certain standard, celebrities embrace the expectation, and then society's oppressive rules are reinforced.

As a culture, and particularly as a gender, we subscribe to magazines and the magazines themselves subscribe to a certain set of values. Flip open an issue of the popular magazines targeting women and you will instantly learn the rules of the game, at least subconsciously. It's pretty obvious that they support the standard of beauty when everywhere you look there is dieting, hair, makeup and sex advice, but I also believe the message is reinforced when you look at what magazines deem as unacceptable. If a celebrity has gained weight (or at least looks like they have in a photo), then we hear about it. Conversely, if a star is looking far more emaciated than usual, we're informed of their eating disorder. There's a tight rope to walk for celebrities; they must be neither too fat nor too skinny, as judged by the ever-critical public. The irony is that often articles shouting, "She's too fat!" and those crying, "She's too skinny!" are in the same magazine.

Models have an even harder job keeping everyone happy with their bodies, and unsurprisingly you often hear that models aren't exactly happy themselves. Pressure to be thin and fit the mould – and therefore the clothes – is intense. An extreme standard is considered normal and accepted in this field; if you want to be a model, you know that you have to be a certain height, weight, width and shape or you'll get nowhere. The girls who do end up in the industry are then photographed, airbrushed and posted on billboards, pasted in magazines, or plastered all over the internet so that the rest of us can

gawk at what we'll never be. Models may only mean to advertise a product, but they promote a certain beauty ideal as well.

Some women, a reported 5% of the world's population¹¹, are naturally the size and shape of a model; their normal weight is significantly lower than the rest of the population. Because this matches society's definition of beauty, women with this rare body type are over-represented in businesses where appearance is important. This creates an imbalance where women of an average size are *under*-represented.

Of course, there are plus-size models now, but why does it have to be either unusually skinny models or plus-size women? I don't think it's a revolutionary idea to show women in magazines who are simply average, a blend of the two.

As a result of the imbalance in representation, there are few examples of women who are celebrated in the media as beautiful that look like the people we see around us. This changes our view of what is attractive quite heavily. If we had more role models in plain view of the media – and therefore society – I think girls could have an appropriate idea about how women are supposed to look. The media could make a positive impact by showing some of the diversity we see among real women.

Of the girls I questioned, about 50% admitted to comparing themselves to celebrities and around another 41% compared themselves to models. Continuing a trend in the survey, the figure isn't as high as some that I have seen when others asked similar questions, but it still represents a substantial number of girls who measure themselves against those they see in print or on the screen. Most of us know that we're setting ourselves up for failure by doing this; teenage girls don't usually have access to personal trainers, chefs, special meal plans, an in-home gym, hair stylists, makeup artists and airbrushing. Somehow, however, we disregard that fact when we compare our thighs to those on a movie star.

Magazines and other forms of media that focus on the famous seem to be encouraging the comparisons. They let us in on star secrets, not-so-subtly hinting that we should try to be like them, and alternate between telling us how normal celebrities are ("so-and-so still buys her own groceries, just like everyone else") and reminding us how luxurious their lives are ("so-and-so loves to use his private jet to travel between Paris and New York on weekends"). So, famous people are

¹¹ (Coopersmith, 2006)

just like us, only *better*. Wonderful. However, by saying that stars are like us, they are also telling us that we can be *just like them*. That is, we can if we do the right work out, eat few enough calories and buy the right clothes.

Comparisons are useless, because there is no workout to change the length of your legs or the shape of your nose. Plastic surgery is an attempt to get around this, but it has limits and it runs up against a significant problem: everyone is unique. Every single person in the world that has been or will be born is different than everyone else. There are no two people who are truly identical, even twins. There will only be one of you; the nature of humanity and creation is that nothing works out exactly the same way twice. That means that, as the celebrity could never be you, you could never be the celebrity (no matter what style of clothes you buy, makeup you wear or diets you go on). There's no way to escape from your body like air from a balloon; when you get right down to it, your body is a "like it or lump it" situation.

However, comparisons are very hard to avoid, even if they don't make sense. No one wants to be described as average, but most people are looking for what normal is. To discover this, we almost instinctively hold ourselves up against the ruler of other people. Celebrities and models, celebrated by our culture, seem like the perfect subjects of comparison. If we want acceptance, we are going to look to the most accepted for tips.

Luckily, comparisons are understandable but not inescapable. Fight the urge even to compare yourself to your friends. Would you compare an apple to an asparagus? Catch yourself in the act of comparing and rewind; make a conscious decision not to do it. Eventually the habit will loosen its hold on you.

It has been said (definitely more than once) that absolute power corrupts absolutely, and it's time to stop being under the power of celebrities. Playing dress up, while entertaining, isn't a licence for the women and men of the entertainment industry to control you. Be your own model, the only one you measure against. The world will only see a girl like you once, and it would be a shame to waste the one it's got.

Part Three

Healthy Concern



Chapter 8: Food Fight

Let's say there's a girl; we'll call her Julie, although she could just as likely be Jane or Kirsten or Ivy. Like a few other people you might know, she loves to dance and dreads math class. She's got an older brother, friends in all her classes and a great smile. Once you get to know her, you find out that her favourite movie is *Grease*, she doesn't like peas and she slept with a nightlight until she was twelve.

What might take you a little longer to notice is that she doesn't usually bring a lunch to school and she's good at finding reasons why she isn't eating anything. Julie might also be busy the nights that your group of friends invite her out for pizza, even if they offer to pay. You probably won't see her stand in front of the mirror every night and pinch and prod at her "fat", but you often hear her talk about herself in a way that sort of worries you. When you notice that Julie's pants are looking looser and she begins to get really touchy about food, do you say anything? Do you recognize that Julie may have a serious eating disorder? Julie isn't alone either; chances are some of this behaviour is a little familiar to you.

Do you know someone who is wasting away, a victim of the Beast? When I asked girls if they knew someone (including themselves) who had unhealthy eating behaviour like starving themselves, vomiting, using laxatives and skipping meals, 78% said yes.

Statistics for eating disorders vary and with mental illness it's often hard to be completely accurate because not everyone who suffers will come forward. Approximately 3% of women in Canada will be affected by an eating disorder in their lifetime¹². That figure represents those *directly* affected with a *clinical* eating disorder, not the women who show a few symptoms of a clinical disorder and are haunted by self-loathing. A reported one in six women have disordered eating *behaviour*, which means that they don't have full blown eating disorders but they aren't healthy either¹³. Those who watch friends, sisters,

¹² (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2002)

¹³ (Wiatt, 2005)

wives and mothers struggle every day not to hate themselves are also affected by eating disorders, raising the number of people impacted even higher.

Anorexia nervosa is described as an intense fear of being fat, a distorted body image and the loss of 15% of original body weight. An individual with anorexia believes that she (or he) is fat, even when they are extremely underweight, and refuses to maintain a healthy weight for their height and age. Anorexics starve themselves, consuming very few calories a day, and often exercise relentlessly. As you could imagine, this is extremely hard on their bodies.

An example of how this affects them is that many female anorexics stop getting their period or it becomes very irregular, skipping several months. Sure, your period isn't exactly the best part of the month, but it does signal the fact that you could someday have children; eating disorders can cause infertility.

Bulimia, on the other hand, is different. Bulimics go through binge and purge cycles where they first eat a large amount of food, but then throw it back up, often because of guilt over the loss of control and fear of becoming fat. While an anorexic will eventually look very wasted away, the weight of someone who is bulimic will fluctuate but remain around the same. Usually alternating between strictly dieting or starving herself completely, a bulimic will then binge and consume a lot of high calorie food. Immediately after, she vomits to get rid of it. Often, the two disorders are combined; many anorexics also show bulimic patterns.

Because they aren't necessarily emaciated, bulimics can seem less sick than anorexics, but there are serious health concerns for them as well. All forms of eating disorders are called *disorders* for a reason; you don't have to be extremely skinny to be killing yourself.

**You don't have to
be extremely
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yourself.**

Some of the consequences of anorexia and/or bulimia:

Malnutrition	Osteoporosis (loss of bone density)
Dehydration	Menstruation stops
Heart attack	Infertility
Heart failure	Dental problems (erosion of enamel, etc.)
Constant tiredness and weakness	Muscle atrophy (the body feeds off muscle)
Seizures	Lanugo (soft hair growing all over the body)
Depression	Liver failure
Gastric rupture	Death
Electrolyte imbalance	
Heartbeat irregularity	
Kidney damage or failure	

Arguably, the body instinctively has two goals in life: create offspring and stay alive. An eating disorder conflicts with both of these targets, not only creating the potential for infertility but also subverting its ability to survive. The body requires nutrients in order to do its many tasks, but an eating disorder ignores the body's needs in order to reach its own goal: "perfection".

Eating disorders start out in many different ways and have many different causes. Media and society do play a contributing role by enforcing a standard of beauty that often requires starvation to adhere to, but they're not the only cause. Personality and even genetics have been linked to an increased risk for an eating disorder. Having a family member, especially a parent, with an eating disorder can put someone at a greater risk of having one herself, and studies have shown that a family history of alcoholism, depression, or physical or sexual abuse can also influence an eating disorder.

Many personality traits are associated with eating disorders, although possessing these qualities doesn't mean that you must have a problem, just as not having any of them doesn't mean that you're immune.

Eating disorders are often connected to the following:

For anorexia nervosa:

- Perfectionist tendencies/unachievable standards
- Strong desire to be special
- Seeking approval (being a “people pleaser”)
- Anxiety
- Competitive nature
- Fear of change and risk
- Low self-esteem

For bulimia nervosa:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Lack of ability to deal with stress
- Low impulse control
- Low self-esteem

Anorexia and bulimia often keep the same company, and many personality traits, signs, symptoms and health risks overlap. The above list is not complete or comprehensive and, for example, additional qualities that indicate a higher risk for both eating disorders are a lack of identity, desire for control or an inability to express emotions like anger.

The qualities I've listed may be a little scary to read; I know that it's easy to go down lists of disorder and disease risk factors or symptoms and recognize some of your own behaviour and feelings. That's what makes self-examination and honesty important, because obviously not every perfectionist is anorexic. Those with eating disorders are using anorexia or bulimia to channel or deal with these traits; perfectionism can express itself as hard work, or it can express itself as an obsession with perfecting your body, or even as both. A lot of information is merely meant to invite investigation or encourage examination, not diagnose someone.

Essentially, each person affected with an eating disorder has their own reasons for it. Personality can set up people to be especially vulnerable to eating disorders, but other circumstances can then add to the problem. For example, growing up in a household where food is highly regimented or where parents emphasize appearance can affect how people relate to food.

Many environments outside the home can put girls at a higher risk. Acting and modeling tend to encourage girls to be hyper-aware of body standards and how they are conforming to them, while sports like dancing, figure skating and gymnastics seem to require a certain body type and appearance is part of the judging. This added pressure can have negative effects, especially if someone is already dealing with image issues.

Getting yourself off the stage or out of the arena won't necessarily solve the problem of being judged, however. Anywhere there are peers, there's also the potential for bullying. Teasing is a relatively innocent word to describe what goes on between kids and teenagers at times and it can also set off an eating disorder in some cases; mocking, name calling, jokes and bullying can combine with previous insecurities to cause major damage to self-esteem.

One of the triggers of eating disorders is the media. The way that it perpetuates the beauty standards can have a profound influence on those who may already be vulnerable. Our media is encouraging people to starve themselves through whom it idolizes and what it deems important, reflecting the values of our culture. This has no better example than what happened when television was introduced to Fiji.

The Fiji islands make up a little nation that you can find on an atlas by looking east of Australia and west of the international dateline. In 1995, new ideas were introduced to Fiji through television programming. Suddenly, teenage girls all across the country were exposed to the Western version of beauty. Our perception that skinny is pretty was completely *opposite* to the Fijian idea that being thin was bad. Gaining weight was considered a good thing, not a cause for shame.

Their cultural tradition was upset in three years. Researchers found that the percentage of teenage girls in Fiji using vomiting to control their weight had risen from 3% to 15%. In the short period of time between 1995 (before television) and 1998 (three years after Western television programs were introduced), 12% of girls had been convinced that weight control was so important that they were willing to throw up on purpose, purging to keep off the extra pounds that their own culture considered attractive.

The study reported that girls wanted to look like the women that they saw on shows and felt disgusting; you don't have to wonder if these girls would have felt the same way if television *hadn't* been introduced. However, it wasn't the television that was the problem, but rather the introduction of Western ideas about beauty. It's solid

evidence that media can play an influential role in the development of an eating disorder by promoting unhealthy ideas.

This makes the constant advertising of diets and fitness plans in our society especially worrying. Dieting can lead to disordered eating, especially since many crash diets encourage anorexic behaviour, although usually for short periods of time. "Only eat celery for a week and you'll lose 15 pounds!" That's not healthy, and there's no one who could convince me otherwise.

We focus so much on the health risks of being overweight, but we rarely hear about the risks of being underweight. Notice that one of the major threats against gaining weight is the increased risk for heart attack, but heart attack is a possible consequence of starving yourself as well. Advertisers – concerned about selling a product or service – are pushing people to diet, to change and constantly control the way they eat and exercise; businesses don't realize (or seem to care, if they do) that many people go from dieting to starving. Companies looking to cut a profit could be starting a war between a girl and her body.

When someone discovers that dieting is a way to exert control *and* get compliments, it seems logical that more is better. Our society focuses on extremes, from extra large fries to super models, and this feeds the "more mentality." If a little is good, more dieting must be better, which means less food and increased exercise until it's not a diet but a disorder that's become a way of life.

When you have an eating disorder, food becomes your world. It starts out that you feel a new sense of control and if you notice that you look skinnier or weigh less, you're encouraged to keep going. You might even get compliments, reinforcing the behaviour, but it doesn't take long for the eating disorder to take over. Soon, you really only think about food; you're always hungry and always afraid to eat. It takes a lot of planning to avoid eating, and when you're starving it's often hard to think clearly. Even as you lose weight, it's never enough to stop; no size is small enough.

However, even when an eating disorder has consumed someone, it's not always obvious. The signs can be overt or rather subtle; those affected are often very cold, may wear many layers to hide their extreme weight loss, have strange food rituals (for example, cutting everything into very small pieces), might withdraw from friends, use the bathroom frequently after meals, and constantly make excuses for their strange behaviour. Victims can't see themselves realistically, believing that they're fat even when you can see bones nearly poking

through their skin, and it is this mental aspect of the disorder that drives the other behaviours.

Most of the information I've provided are examples and just a small sampling of what's actually out there. There's so much more to be learned about eating disorders and resources are available for more information and for help. If some of this is hitting a little close to home, or you're looking for information that wasn't provided, such as how to deal with someone you suspect has a problem, there are many places to go. Websites like www.anred.com, www.nedic.ca and www.somethingfishy.org are a great place to start. They provide information, statistics, advice and ways for someone to get help.

Remember, just because someone isn't super, super skinny doesn't mean that they don't have a disorder. In fact, 76% of overweight girls have used unhealthy tactics associated with eating disorders to control their weight¹⁴.

We come in all shapes and sizes, and therefore so do the problems that we face. If this is just starting to creep up on you, it will be easier to get help sooner rather than later. Eating disorders have one of the highest fatality rates of any mental illness; without treatment, up to 20% of those affected will starve themselves to death¹⁵. This means that getting help is very important.

Most of us have heard of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa already, as they are the two most widely acknowledged eating disorders, but there are unofficial disorders like anorexia athletica (over-exercising for weight loss and self-worth) and also eating disorders of a different kind, like binge eating disorder (consistently overeating). They are all serious and require professional treatment.

Don't win the food fight – defeating the desire for what your body needs in favour of what “perfection” demands – and lose your life. It's not a fair trade. If you even suspect that you, a friend, or a relative may have an eating disorder (or the beginnings of one), *reach out*. Ask for help, get informed and start the process of recovery. There are people who have conquered this; you can add to their number. It's never too late to discover your own value and beauty.

¹⁴(Neumark-Sztainer, 2005)

¹⁵ (Wiatt, 2005)



Chapter 9: Hamburgers (The Flip Side)

Surprise, surprise, your body image also relies on – what else? – your actual body. Our self-image may be warped, but we have to start somewhere; as much as it is influenced by outside factors, it eventually comes down to how you relate to the skin and bones you're made of. Your health helps determine what you look like, and therefore greatly impacts how you feel about the face you show to the world. Consequently, while our body alone should not determine our self-worth, we also have to accept that taking care of ourselves is important to our well-being.

Here is a secret that your doctor probably never told you: health is all about respect and understanding. It's true. Staying healthy requires respect for and an understanding of what your body needs, as well as respect for your own value (i.e. loving yourself because you're you). This includes eating so that your body can obtain everything it needs to function properly and exercising to keep your body strong so it can perform tasks more easily. It may not always seem like it, but your body is your friend and you have to be kind to it, because you can't trade it in. You're stuck together for life, so treating yourself well will improve your time together.

As much as the media focuses far too heavily on diets that don't work in the long run, it's true that there are significant health risks associated with carrying too much extra weight. A healthy concern is appropriate; this just means practicing moderation and trying to eat a variety of foods, as well as staying active. It's not merely that too many chocolate bars aren't good for you, as they don't have many of the nutrients that your body needs; eating only apples isn't good for you either, even though the fruit would provide more nutrition.

Being healthy takes effort; it's essentially just *doing* something, taking action. Verbs are the key, whether you're choosing to follow the food guide and picking healthier options, or you're lifting weights in

front of the television a few nights a week. Health doesn't just happen to you. Diet pills are advertized many places and promise easy, fast results without lifting a finger, but remember the rule that health requires action in order to get the benefits.

The advantages of eating well and exercising regularly go beyond just slimming down to the next size or being able to wear a different kind of clothing. Compare how you feel after eating fast food and how you feel after a healthier option, like fruit cocktail and a sandwich. It's not the immediate feeling, but the amount of energy you have an hour later and how active you feel. Plus, there's a financial advantage as well to packing a healthier lunch from home, because it'll likely leave you with more spending money, since you wouldn't be buying fast food for lunch.

Also, exercise can be fun. It's a great way to meet people and expand your circle of friends, especially if you join a team sport. Whether you end up taking a dance class, yoga, kickboxing or playing ringette, exercise triggers endorphins, which make you feel good afterwards. Staying active can help you sleep better, concentrate more easily and release stress. It's also empowering to see skills develop if you try a new activity, or to know that you are getting stronger and faster.

All of this generally tends to make you feel good about yourself; feeling guilty about eating three brownies doesn't. Eating shouldn't be about guilt. What are you guilty for? After all, the only one affected is you (unless you stole the brownie your younger brother had been eyeing...) and you've made the decision to eat it, so *enjoy* the brownie. However, also keep in mind that, as awesome as it would be, your body needs more from its food than sugar.

In the most basic way, you eat food because your body requires things that it can't produce itself in order to work properly. Mainly, food provides energy so that your body can do its countless jobs. Calories represent the amount of energy that your body can get out of food; your body needs calories to keep going. Everyone needs a different amount of energy to power their body, depending on factors like metabolism speed and activity level. If you eat more calories than your body currently needs, you store the excess for later, just in case. In the same way that you keep food in your pantry or refrigerator, in case you get hungry later, your body keeps extra calories as fat.

Fat is often regarded like a disease that has yet to be cured, but it's very important to have fat in your diet and on your body. Women are *recommended* to have anywhere from eighteen to twenty-five percent

body fat, and twelve to fourteen percent body fat is thought to be necessary to maintain important body activities (for example, menstruation) and to pad vital organs¹⁶. This means that the fat some people think is gross is actually critical to your health.

There are many types of fats, including monounsaturated and polyunsaturated (both of which are considered good for you in moderation), as well as saturated fats, which aren't as healthy. Transfats should actually be avoided, since your body doesn't need any of these at all. Some governments are even considering banning them, because they increase your risk for heart disease, among other things, and aren't necessary.

Another group that has a bad reputation is carbohydrates. Carbs come in two forms, simple and complex. Simple carbohydrates are found in the foods that give you temporary energy, like sugar, while complex carbohydrates are better for you, containing more nutrients and fibre, and make up foods like whole grain breads, brown rice, fruits and vegetables. According to Canada's Food Guide, carbs are the largest part of a healthy diet, since the average teenage girl needs about seven servings of fruits and vegetables and six grain products a day. Carbohydrates are the main source of our energy and cutting them out of your day is never a good idea, especially since they keep your brain and nervous system functioning properly and fibre can lower risks of diabetes and heart disease.

Protein is also an important part of a healthy diet. Meat, fish, poultry, nuts, eggs and dairy all provide the stuff that makes up your tissues, blood and other important body components. Canada's Food Guide recommends that we get three to four servings of dairy and another two servings of meat and alternatives every day. Even vegetarians and vegans need protein to keep their bodies in top shape, so they need to make use of alternative sources like tofu.

Most of us have heard of fat, carbohydrates and protein before in Health class – and even paid enough attention to already know that they're good for us – but the vitamins and minerals are a little more mysterious.

All vitamins are necessary to help your body to function, but only some vitamins can be made in the body; others can't and this means that your eating habits have to make up for it. Vitamins come in water soluble and fat soluble varieties; the latter can build up in your body if you have too much, causing various problems, so it's important

¹⁶ (Coopersmith, 2006)

that you don't take vitamin supplements without asking your doctor first and be sure to eat a variety of foods. Vitamin A, B₁ (thiamin), B₂ (riboflavin), B₃ (niacin), B₅, B₆ (pyridoxine), B₉ (folic acid), B₁₂, C (ascorbic acid), D, E and K are all necessary to your health. They do everything from helping your body heal, to maintaining your eyesight, to keeping your nervous system in order.

Minerals have a shorter list, consisting of familiar names and a few surprises. While many people know that we need calcium, iron, potassium and sodium, who knew that our body requires a little zinc, iodine, chromium, copper, magnesium, selenium and manganese? It just so happens that we need these minerals to perform functions like transporting oxygen and building healthy bones. They also prevent diseases later in life; for example, milk is a must on the menu because, among many other things, calcium helps you avoid osteoporosis.

Water is another critical ingredient in our health. The fact is that most teenagers need more water than they're drinking and it's an easy problem to solve. Over half of our body is made up of the wet stuff, so it's critical to our functioning, and we have to add to our supply throughout the day. Be sure to hydrate before you exercise, when you're sick and – of course – when you're thirsty. It's not the most interesting thing to drink, but it's what our body needs. These days, there are plenty of tasty powders that you can add to water, so make a habit of reaching for H₂O instead of pop.

Another easy habit that leads to a healthier life style is eating breakfast. The age of dieting could lead us to thinking that skipping a meal would be a good thing, since those are calories that you're not eating and therefore weight that you're not gaining, but that's not the case at all. Eating breakfast wakes up your metabolism, and this means that you'll actually burn more calories during the day just doing what you usually do than if you had skipped breakfast.

Also, if you've been sleeping for eight to nine hours (hint: that's how much you *should* be sleeping a night), you obviously haven't eaten anything in at least that long; your body hasn't received fuel in a while. Just lying in bed and breathing requires your cells to do work, and how much energy is required to do this work is called your resting metabolic rate, or your basal metabolic rate. Staying alive, even when you're just sleeping, takes energy and so you probably *need* to eat breakfast, even though you don't feel hungry. If you absolutely hate to eat in the morning, try starting small; eat an apple or granola bar on the way to the bus stop.

Remember that eating isn't the whole picture, however. Exercise is critical to keeping yourself strong and healthy. Not only should we be participating in daily cardiovascular exercise, which includes anything that gets your heart rate up for an extended period of time, but we also need to keep in mind resistance (weight) training, and flexibility. Just as we should eat a variety of foods, we should be doing a variety of exercises. Your body can move in a lot of different ways, but to be efficient or strong in all areas, it needs practice. Some girls don't like the sports or activities introduced in gym class, but that's not all there is to exercise so don't let that stop you. There's something for everyone, so try a new class, team or sport; you might find that being active is something that you enjoy.

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picture.**

Staying healthy doesn't have to be a chore. Your lifestyle should ideally be one that lets you have your cake and eat it too, as long as that's not all you're having. A healthy diet isn't like all the other diets you've heard about; with a balance of foods and activities that takes into account both what you want and what your body needs, you can get into the habit of being good to yourself.

Every strong relationship requires respect and understanding, and the way that you relate to your body should reflect that. Listen to what it's telling you; for example, eat when you're hungry and stop when you're full. Each cell has its own job and needs, but they depend on you to speak for them. Every second, trillions of tiny parts are working together to keep you alive and well. Why not help them out?



Chapter 10: Conclusions

*“What if there are
No damsels in distress?
What if I knew that
And I called your bluff?
Don’t you think every kitten
Figures out how to get down
Whether or not you ever show up?”*

Not a Pretty Girl by Ani DiFranco¹⁷

We’ve been watching princesses fall in love and ride off into a happy ending all our lives; it’s no wonder that it sounds like a good idea. But in the movies, all the princesses look the same, and that’s not how it really goes. Happy endings come in more than one variety, so make your own. Don’t fall in love with the Beast, in love with all the hype and the standards and the dieting regimens.

I heard from some girls that they felt beautiful when they had a boyfriend and (as glad as I am that they feel good about themselves) I have to wonder why they need a boyfriend to feel beautiful. What happens when they break up? Of course the support of those around us makes us feel good about ourselves, that’s why it’s important to surround ourselves with people who care about us, but why do we let other people dictate our self-esteem?

In other instances, girls said that they were often told that they were beautiful, but that it didn’t make them feel any better about themselves. Compliments are sometimes hard for girls to gracefully accept, especially when they look in the mirror and they don’t agree that they’re beautiful. It seems that it’s a lot easier to believe the bad things people tell you about yourself than the good things.

¹⁷ "Not A Pretty Girl" written by Ani DiFranco

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The answer to both scenarios is building up a love for yourself that is separate from the opinion of those around you. It's harder to rely on yourself to determine your value, instead depending on other people or the media, but it's also empowering. Teenagers are constantly creating and recreating their identity and their ideas; this is the best time to convince yourself that you're beautiful and to believe that you decide how you feel.

I decide every day; some days are easier than others. The full length mirror in my room knows me well. It can take conscious thought to avoid insulting myself and some days it's a bit more of an effort to smile at my reflection, but the belief that I'm beautiful holds me afloat when I find "flaws" in my body. I have to catch myself every time I compare my thighs, or my stomach, or my chest with other girls; I remind myself that I'll never look like someone else and that it's okay. I try to focus on things that I like and I make it a policy not to trash talk myself.

We get enough judgement, so we don't need to add ourselves to the jury. At a certain point, I just walk away from the mirror. I consider myself a confident person, pretty secure, but that doesn't mean that I'm immune to voices telling me that I'm ugly; it just means that I fight back.

**We get
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Beneath the long list of questions on my survey, I left some lines for comments. I know that some girls talk about this, or at least want to, from the conversations that were sparked when I handed out my survey, but I didn't get a lot of comments. In the few I did receive, one stood out: "Every girl isn't happy with their appearance." Those are the exact words that a girl wrote, and I'm sure that she believes it.

A lot of girls think that it's normal for them not to like their appearance. I'm sure it's normal (as in average, or common) but that doesn't mean that it has to be that way. That doesn't mean that it's right. Our bodies are changing, we're not always in control, and that's not much fun, but that doesn't give us an excuse to hate ourselves. If hate is the average, then we can create a new one, a new normal. You probably won't be happy with your hips or your butt or your skin all the time, but what about *often* seeing the beauty in yourself? On the days when your hair won't behave, you've hidden your face in concealer

and your clothes don't match, you're still the same person. It's not the clothes or the makeup that's beautiful. It's always you.

Self-esteem is more than just body image, but that single area can infect all the others. When we don't want to be looked at, when we feel ugly, how confident to try new things are we? When the media is subtly telling us that it's what is on the outside that counts, and we begin to agree, that affects how we value ourselves. Fortunately, just as hate can poison everything else, love can spread.

When you look in the mirror, pretend that it's someone else. Pretend that you're looking at someone you care about. Have you ever noticed that once you get to know someone really well (for example, your best friend) that they look more attractive? You're much more likely to forgive "flaws" in someone you like, so convince yourself that you like that girl in the mirror. Pretend for at least a few minutes in the morning and find things that you love about yourself, then let those few minutes spread throughout the day if you can. Be your own friend.

I am aware how corny this can sound. Most people have heard that they should love themselves; much of this is old news. It needs to be repeated, obviously. The message doesn't seem to be getting through but, thankfully, there are people talking about this. There are countless organizations and lobby groups working to fight against advertizing, bullying, eating disorders and impossible beauty standards, including national groups and ones in your community. Join a different sort of crowd, and feel free not to use your inside voice.

Numbers – sizes, ratings, weights – are just *numbers*, no matter what the media, the advertisers, society or whoever else would like you to think. Beauty isn't measured in pounds, kilograms or dress sizes. It can't be given or taken away. Everyone has their own kind, each incomparable, each equal. The world can have the rest of the adjectives (gorgeous, sexy, hot, pretty, cute...) if we can just take back beautiful and make it our own. We just need to find the beauty without the Beast.

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About the Author

Megan Ryland was born January 14, 1991 in Winnipeg, Manitoba but moved to Calgary, Alberta in 1995. She discovered the power of language and stories at an early age and this passion for words has followed her throughout her life. Megan's theory is that if you don't like to read, you just haven't found the right book, and she'd be happy to recommend a few. When she's not reading or writing, she enjoys spending time with her friends, listening to music, playing soccer and acting in school plays. Megan currently lives with her parents, younger sister and their dog, but hopes to expand her horizons by attending university out-of-province next fall. For more information about Megan or Beauty and Beast, head over to <http://beautyvsbeast.wordpress.com>.



“You are so *fat!*” My sister spat the words at me, as if this were the worst possible thing.

This book is a pocket-sized introduction to why teenage girls across North America think they're ugly, and why they're wrong.

Every girl deserves to recognize her own beauty and with all the influences shouting, “Not good enough!” every day, it's harder than ever before. Growing up, girls have to face down bullies, stereotypes, advertisers, the media and even sometimes friends and family in the fight to love themselves for who they are.

From the moment a girl is born to the day she dies, there is an ideal she is expected to live up to but never can. Although many people are trying them, there are no diets, exercise machines, surgeries or pills that can deliver on their promises of “perfection,” when being perfect means becoming someone you're not.

This isn't a self-help book; it's a gateway to looking at things differently and starting to see someone new in the mirror. Knowledge is not only power; it's confidence, and there are few things more attractive than that. We've grown accustomed to the standard of beauty taught to us by pop stars and pop culture alike, but it's time to wake up and end the love/hate story of girls and their bodies to start a new chapter.

'Here is an inspirational social commentary written by a teen which will guide other teens out of the wilderness. This is a daring and timely statement shredding conventional ideas of beauty—a beauty deeper than your skin and much harder to understand and appreciate. *Beauty and the Beast* challenges teens to become authentic models in society.'

– Marlene Ponjavic – educator

**Size 00 is the new number
of the beast.**

